

"No." Zoë stood at the foot of her bed, arms folded across her chest, a pose made somewhat less fearsome by the lack of pants. "Husband, we've had this discussion."

"But Zoë," Wash protested. "You always said we could try it!"

Wash looked hopefully up at Zoë, whose frown did not waver. "No."

He tilted his head, his blue eyes glinting deviously in the faint light of their bunk. "Think of it as a trial run for a baby."

Zoë sighed. Leaning over, she lifted a squirming furry bundle from the floor. "This?" she gestured. "This is not a baby. This is a job."

Wash grinned as the puppy licked her chin. "See, she likes you."

Zoë made a face. "It has to go back, dear, and you know it."

"Don't call her *it*. She has a name, and it's Vera."

"Vera?" Zoë gave her husband a flat look. "Jayne's favorite gun is named Vera."

"The same gun which Vera here was gnawing on when I rescued her from the walking weapon. It was destiny, Zoë."

"The answer is still no." The puppy squirmed in her arms. "'Sides, we've already had this discussion 'bout taking cargo. That means we can't keep her."

"You're missing the point here, cupcake."

With a sigh, Zoë turned back around. "And the point would be what exactly?"

"We wouldn't just take Vera, we'd buy her."

"Husband," Zoë said patiently. "The contact wants four sets of mating pairs of beagles. That means four boys and four girls." Vera licked Zoë's face and yipped happily. "We don't have the money anyway."

Wash grinned mischievously. "And if I told you we did?"

"I would wonder when you robbed a bank without telling me."

He gave her his most disarming smile, and patted the bed beside him. "Come sit down. Bond with her a little. If you don't love her by the time we land, I won't breathe another word about it."

"I'm more interested in all this money we supposedly have." She handed the puppy back to Wash.

He settled the beagle in his lap, scratching her behind the ears. "Might be that I've been setting some aside here and there for a rainy day."

Zoë raised an eyebrow, but sat down beside him. "Really now?" She absently petted Vera, who was happily snuggled down in Wash's lap. "And how have you done this?"

"How have I done it? Or how have I done it without my beloved finding out?"

"Both," she decided. "As far as I know, we have barely made enough to buy new clothes this year."

He plucked at the collar of his Hawaiian shirt. "And does it look like I've been spending any money on my clothes?"

Zoë smiled and smoothed his collar back down. "You have been looking slightly ragged lately. I thought you were expressing your new style."

"I still have some surprises up my sleeve yet."

"Well, husband." Zoë stood, recapturing Vera and tucking her under an arm. "What say we throw this mongrel out, and you can show me what you have up your sleeves?"

"We've got time for that before planet fall?" He questioned, already working on the buttons of his shirt.

"We'll make time," she promised, dropping the puppy outside the door.

Vera took off at a scamper as soon as the hatch was closed, her paws slipping out from under her on the slick metal. The pups had been on board more than a week, and had quickly learned the run of the ship. She slid around a corner and careened down the stairs, her feet getting tangled underneath herself. She landed in a soft cushion of vests at the foot of the steps; one ear flopped over atop her head.

Vera shook herself hard and found herself looking into a pair of puzzled brown eyes.

"Did you get lost?" The girl lifted the puppy out of the vests and into her lap. "You don't want to lay there. Simon is protective of his shell."

Vera swiped her tongue over the girl's chin, squirming happily.

River giggled. "That tickles, Little Gun."

"What tickles?" Simon stuck his head out of the door.

She spun around, and Simon looked from River to the puppy, to the vests littering the floor. "How did those get out there?" He moved to pick up one of the vests and shook it out. "I've been looking for them all morning."

River shrugged, floating to her feet with the puppy in her arms. "You should wear shirts that show off your shoulders. Kaylee likes them."

"That may be, but these are more appropriate," he frowned, trying to brush the dog hair off his favorite.

River examined her brother. "You'll look like a doll in a case. Kaylee won't want to play with you."

"Kaylee always wants to play with me," he murmured offhandedly, and then froze. "Not that – I mean, she's–"

River blinked innocently, petting the dog in her arms. "You missed a spot shaving."

He rubbed his chin. "I did?"

Simon ducked back into their rooms with a frown. River shared a look with Vera, and then smiled. "Go on, Little Gun. Go find your friends."

She yipped as River set her down, and ran off toward the cargo bay where Jayne and Kaylee had set up a makeshift kennel for the eight puppies they were transporting – a kennel that hadn't seen use outside the first day.

Vera was investigating the far corners of the cargo bay when she was unceremoniously grabbed by the scruff of her neck. She yipped in irritation.

"There you are." Jayne held her aloft with a glower. "Better not've been in my bunk again."

She barked playfully, licking his face enthusiastically. "Well," Mal said, "Looks like someone on this boat likes you."

He tucked the puppy beneath his arm. "Just a dog."

Mal gestured to the puppy. "We'll be makin' landfall in another hour. She the last one?"

Jayne tugged the pup's nose out of his armpit and placed her in the kennel with the others. "Nope." He smirked. "Kaylee's got one in the engine room with her."

Mal sighed. "Sooner we're rid of these the better. And I thought the cattle were bad."

The big man shrugged and captured another escaping puppy. "People pay good money for huntin' dogs. And at least these is easier to clean up after."

"The cattle stayed in one place though, 'stead of getting into everything." He patted the cage. "Get these ones locked up and then go fetch the puppy Kaylee has."

"'Magine she's too busy getting ready to worry about the pups. How long has it been since she's been home, anyway?"

"Not since we picked her up." Mal rubbed at the back of his neck. "Feel a mite guilty takin' so long to get her back for a visit."

Jayne shrugged. "She woulda asked, if she wanted. You never could say no to that girl."

He smirked. "Which is why I'm sendin' you to pry that puppy outta her arms instead of me."

Jayne's mouth fell open in dismay. "Cap'n, that ain't fair!"

But he was already walking away. "That's an order, Jayne."

"Xiongmao niao. Henku de laoban."



Simon ran a hand over his jacket again, conscious of the wrinkles he hadn't been able to smooth out before leaving the ship.

They'd landed on Hartford, the third moon off Paquin, an hour ago. The Captain, Jayne and Zoe were taking the shuttle and the puppies to the buyer, and had dropped the rest of them on a dirt road half-way to the Frye's farm rather than land Serenity on their property without warning.

From what he'd seen so far of the moon, it was just like all the others on the Rim: hot, brown, and dirty. He counted himself lucky that the chief export of Hartford seemed to be grain, rather than mud as on Canton. It certainly smelled better.

His eyes landed on Kaylee who led the pack, bouncing with every step, the hem of her flowered dress fluttering in the breeze. River was skipping beside her, slipping into an intricate dance step every few yards, and Simon imagined that Kaylee's excitement must be contagious.

Inara, Book and Wash hung back a bit, and Simon marvelled at the Companion's ability to look perfectly comfortable in the sweltering heat when he felt ready to self-combust. The 'verse was simply an unjust place.

He tugged anxiously at his collar again, wishing that they had proper starch on Serenity. His shirt was in sad shape. He really didn't want to contemplate what Kaylee's parents were going to think. He didn't think he was going to present a very dignified appearance and he wanted to make a good impression. Not that he and Kaylee were involved, but he did like her – a lot.

Squinting, he could make out a small building through the dust they were kicking up. It was painted a cheery yellow, which meant it had to be Kaylee's house.

Simon looked down at his wrinkled jacket again in concern.

They were going to hate him, he just knew it.

"Is this it, Kaylee?" Inara asked as they approached the small farm house. The yellow paint was faded slightly by the sun, flowers wilting in the yard, all of it overshadowed by the huge barn set a few yards back from the road.

Kaylee didn't seem to hear the question, as she had suddenly squealed and taken off running.

A young man stood up from where he had been tending to the garden, shading his eyes from the sun to see who was coming. He caught sight of Kaylee and let out a whoop of his own, dropping his shovel and lunging forward to swing her around in a circle.

"Jus' look at you, Finn!" Kaylee was giggling. "You've growed some since last year!"

The younger man finally released Kaylee with a happy whoop of joy. "Ma! Ma! Kaylee's home!"

A woman pushed the door open and stood in the doorway. Her dark eyes were tired, but a large, welcoming smile lit up her whole face.

"Finn, you put your sister down and run off and get your Pa from the shed." Kaylee's mother finished wiping off her hands on her apron and swept her daughter up in a fierce hug. "Kaywinnet, it is so good to see you! You shoulda told us you was coming home!"

"And what kinda surprise would that be?" she asked, the words squeezed from her lungs by the strength of her hug. "I brought my friends, I hope that's no trouble?"

Kaylee's mother grinned at the crew. They were all standing near the fence, except for River, who was perched on the top rail.

"Of course, it's no trouble. We'll just make a little bit more for supper." She released Kaylee and nodded at the crew. "How do, I'm Shelly Frye." She gestured to the barn, "Finn and my husband, Hank, will be up soon to say hello."

Kaylee beamed at the crew as she introduced them. "This is Shepherd Book, Wash, Simon, River and Inara."

Inara stepped forward and clasped both of Shelly's hands in hers. "Kaylee has been a ray of sunshine for us on Serenity. You've truly raised an amazing woman."

Shelly beamed at the compliment. "Why thank you! And I've heard tell that you help take care of my girl up there in the black. I thank you for that."

"I've hardly done much of anything except perhaps provide some companionship, but it's no more than she's done for me. Less even."

"River, come down!" Everyone turned to see Simon urging River from the fence railing.

Shepherd Book cleared his throat and offered his hand to Mrs. Frye. "It's kind of you to welcome us on such short notice."

"Oh, it's of no mind, Shepherd." She continued to smile sunnily. "Kaylee's been fillin' her letters with tales of all the people she's flyin' with. We've been itchin' to meet y'all for the longest time."

She glanced around the small group, the lines around her mouth tightening as she watched Simon trying to coax River down. "Seems like we're missin' a few. Where's that fine Captain of yours?"

"They'll be along after they finish the job," Kaylee assured her.

Finn came around the side of the house, an older man following close behind in his wake. Kaylee's face split into a wide grin and she ran down the stairs and into his arms.

Beyond them, River stopped her pirouette on the fence post and stood still, her huge brown eyes focused on the young man beside them. She lowered her eyes when Finn caught her staring, a flush climbing up her cheeks. Extending one hand regally, she smiled shyly when Finn stepped up to take it and helped her down.

Oblivious, Shelly watched the reunion between father and daughter with a happy smile. Kaylee immediately launched into details of Serenity's engine, bombarding her father with questions. "Always havin' trouble with the Viese lock, Pa. Keeps poppin' out of place no matter what I do to batten it down. Kept tryin' to remember what it was you done with that Cembber engine a while back..."

"Hold on, now Kaylee girl," her Pa said. "No talking business till everybody is settled."

"Sorry, Pa." Kaylee whirled and ran back to tug at Simon's hand. "This here is Simon Tam – remember, I wrote you 'bout him? And that's his sister, River." She waved over her shoulder at where Finn and River were still standing.

"River, that's a pretty name," Simon heard over his shoulder as he nervously said hello.

"Nice to meet you, Mr Tam," Kaylee's Pa said. "I'm Hank Frye."

"It's Doctor Tam, actually," Simon corrected, wincing as soon as the words were out of his mouth.

"Doctor?" Hank frowned, the lines etching deeper into his tanned face as he ran his eyes over Simon.

"Yes, sir." Simon nodded, shifting his weight.

"Hmph," Hank grunted. Simon tried to smile. River rolled her eyes at him behind his back. "Don't look like I pictured 'im," Hank frowned at his daughter, wrapping an arm around her shoulders and leading her into the house. "Figured he'd be bigger."

"Oh, Pa," Kaylee laughed as they walked through the door.

The others followed them inside, Shelly chatting happily with Wash and Inara, and River drifting in beside Finn.

Simon just dropped his head into his hands with a moan.



"Sir, can you kindly not kill us all in a fiery crash?" Zoe asked dryly.

Mal smirked over his shoulder at her. "Nope, I'm good. You can crash us into something later."

Jayne grunted from the back. "Can we hurry? These critters are gettin' squirmy."

They both ignored him.

"What do you think happened to our contact?" Zoe asked.

"Dunno," Mal answered. "Could be that he took off, could be that Badger is an idiot. I'll wave him when we get back to Serenity. With any luck he'll have heard something we haven't."

Zoe sighed. "Something seems wrong about this whole deal, Sir. I'll be glad when we unload those pups." Leaning forward, she scanned the horizon. "We should be nearing them any second now. In fact, I think that's it... three o'clock, Sir."

"I see it. The bright yellow thing."

"Do you know of anyone else who would paint a house such an irritatingly cheery color?"

"Ain't meanin' to point out the obvious," Jayne called from the back. "But we don't even know if we's welcome for a visit, let alone these monsters."

"We'll deal with that when we set down, Jayne," Mal called over his shoulder. "But I'm pretty sure they won't mind a whit."

Zoe nodded in agreement. "And if they do, we pick up the others and head on back to Serenity for the night."

"Jus' so long as somethin' goes to plan," Mal grumbled. "Gorram dogs."

Jayne chuckled when one of the dogs growled. "Think somebody disagrees with you, Cap'n."

Mal set down none-to-gently in an empty field across the dusty road from the house. "Jayne, best you stay here with the pups 'till Zoe and I get acquainted with the Frye's. No point in haulin' all the puppies out to turn 'round and bring 'em back again. Dong ma?"

"But Mal..."

"No buts," Mal said firmly. "Somebody's gotta stay, and we never know when you're gonna open your mouth and say something insultin'."

"Mal!" Jayne's face was the picture of wounded innocence.

"We want these folks to like us," Zoe added. "If they don't, they might try to get Kaylee to stay with them. We could lose us a great mechanic."

"And one of the only decent cooks on board."

Jayne sobered up. "You really think she'd stay?"

"Relax, Jayne," Mal said as he climbed out of the shuttle. "I don't think there is a force in the 'verse strong enough to get Kaylee to leave Serenity."

He scowled through the hatch as Zoe descended. "Y'ain't gonna leave me out here long, are you? Man's gotta eat."

Zoe just smiled and shut the shuttle door in Jayne's face.



Mal had briefly met Kaylee's parents before whisking her off on Serenity. They'd both come with her when she'd come back to the ship the day he'd hired her, and found 'em to be likeable enough people. Weren't no question of where Kaylee got her bubbly personality from, and he found himself looking forward to seeing Shelly again.

Voices floated out on the muggy air as they approached the house, and he slid a glance over to Zoe. "They seem in a good mood."

"They should, sir," she said with a smile as the door came flying open. "They've got Kaylee back."

"Well, they can't keep her," he replied under his breath as Kaylee came to a stop on the stairs, her happy smile fading to a worried frown as she looked back and forth between them.

"Where's Jayne? Nothing went wrong with the job, right? Should I get Simon?" She was already turning to head back inside when Mal stopped her.

"He's fine. Puppy-sitting is all. Them dogs seem to have taken a shine to him. They probably recognize one of their own."

Kaylee swatted Mal on the arm, grinning. "Why do we still got the pups? Don't the contact want 'em?"

Mal sighed. "Couldn't find the contact."

"Well, ain't nothing to do for it now," Kaylee clapped her hands happily. "It's almost dinner time, so come on in and worry about it later."

River stepped outside. "Little Gun and the others will be more comfortable in the barn."

Kaylee glanced over her shoulder and saw River and her brother standing just behind her. "River's probably right. Part o' the shop is still bein' used as a barn. Sure the pups would be happier there."

"Your folks won't mind?" Mal glanced toward the door, his eyes lingering momentarily on the brown haired boy standing a mite too close to River.

"Naw, course not. More the merrier." She grabbed his hand, "Come on inside and see what Ma's cookin' up for us all. Finn and River can go and get those puppies together." She offered Mal a guilty smile for giving orders. "That okay with you, Cap'n?"

"So long as Jayne don't run the two of them over trying to get to supper."

Finn smiled at River. "What say we go get those pups?"

River glowed back at him and took hold of the elbow he'd offered, grinning at Kaylee as they walked by her.

Mal looked from Finn to Kaylee. "Simon all right with this?"

"What? My little brother crushin' on River?" She grinned. "Don't see why not. Don'tcha think they're a dozen kindsa cute?"

"Yeah, but," Mal tried to explain. "She's..."

"Don't make her any less cute," Zoe offered. "We'll keep on eye on it, make sure he behaves himself."

"Oh, don't you worry. Finn's a right proper gentleman. Not like his big sis." Kaylee giggled as she dragged them inside.

Mal was immediately met with the rich scent of roasted turkey as they entered, setting his mouth to watering before he'd even closed the door behind him. "Think I done died and gone to heaven, Zo."

Visible through the kitchen, Shelly was directing the mayhem with a steady hand. Inara sat at the table, the sleeves of her ornate dress rolled up past the elbows, her manicured fingers buried in bowl of mashed tomatoes. Wash stood in front of the turkey with a serrated knife, mangling pieces of it onto the plate beside him. Shepherd Book moved around the large oak table in the centre of the room, laying out dishes and silverware, attempting to give Wash advice.

Shelly barely looked up when Kaylee hollered, "Ma, Cap'n and Zoe are here!"

"Nice to see you, Captain, Zoe," she nodded. "Mal, we could use you over with the biscuits. And Zoe, dear, could you help the Shepherd?"

Mal grinned, stopping at the sink to wash his hands before working on the dough all laid out, reading for cutting. "You run a tighter ship than I do, Mrs. Frye."

"Course I do," she said. "I'm a woman."

"Well said, Mrs. Frye." Inara smiled as Kaylee sat down with a bowl of snap peas.

Mal went to work on the biscuit dough, cutting out the circles carefully. "And where's Simon? Not that I think it's wise to have him anywhere near the kitchen."

Kaylee laughed nervously. "He's in the other room, keepin' Pa company." She stepped towards the doorway. "Maybe I should go see if they need anything. Like drinks or somethin'."

"Kaywinnit, you sit yourself right back down again. Your Pa won't do nothin' to hurt the boy."

Mal blinked. "Is Simon having some kinda conversation with your Pa that I need to know about?"

Kaylee sighed. "No, but Pa knows I like him, and so he's being mean." She glanced towards the door again. "Will you go check on him? You know Simon has no idea how to talk to folks."

Mal smirked. "Soon as I got the biscuits in the oven. But I gotta tell you Kaylee, there's no one who can teach the doc to talk like a regular body. 'Sides, I kinda like seein' him squirm."

Kaylee made a face. "That ain't nice, Cap'n."

He was turning back to the biscuits when Jayne strode in. "Somethin' sure smells good!" he enthused. "I followed the smell of turkey all the way here!"

He took off his hat with a grin, spotting Shelly. "You must be Kaylee's Ma." He stuck his hand out to shake. "I can see where she gets her looks."

Shelly took the hand held out to her and shook it. "Oh, you are a charmer, aren't you?" she smiled, flushing prettily.

Jayne tilted his head, running his eyes appreciatively over Mrs. Frye. "Naw, I take it back. You're way too young t'be her Ma."

"Jayne," Mal growled warningly.

"What? I was just sayin'..."

"Oh, he didn't mean no harm, Captain." Shelly urged Jayne toward the table. "You just have a seat here, Jayne. Supper'll be just a few more minutes. I was thinkin' there was still one more of you missin'. Kaylee always has such sweet things to say about you."

Everyone in the room turned to look at Kaylee in surprise. "She does?"

"She does?" Jayne looked baffled.

"I do?"

"Well, sure you do," Shelly said cheerfully. "You talk so nice about all your friends, and I just know this one must be especial nice, how sweet he talks!"

Jayne threw her a flirtatious wink and a grin. "That I am, ma'am. I'm nice through and through."

Kaylee snorted. "I think you could stand to be nicer, sometimes."

Jayne shot her a wounded look. "I'm plenty nice!"

"Kaylee, *bao bai*," Shelly patted her on the shoulder. "You be polite when we got guests. 'Specially when they're bein' so polite."

"Yeah, see... I'm polite." He rose from his seat, smiling at Mrs Frye and talking over the smothered laughter coming from Wash's side of the kitchen, "Sure smells heavenly in here. Anything I can do to help?"

Before Shelly could reply, Mal jumped in.

"Yeah, Jayne," he gestured with floury hands. "Why don't you take over for me, and I'll go check on our doctor?"

Jayne nodded, wiping his hands off with a towel. "Sure, biscuits I can handle." He threw a grin over his shoulder at Shelly. "Bet they won't be good as yours, though."

Wash and Zoe exchanged amazed looks as Shelly giggled and flicked her towel at him.

Mal hadn't made it to the doorway when Simon appeared, eyes scanning the kitchen before he frowned. "Where's River?"

The mercenary didn't bother to look up from his task. "Ah, she and Finn are takin' care of the pups. Gettin' 'em settled in the barn." He flashed Shelly a smile, "Right nice of you to put 'em up."

Simon blinked. "You left River alone? With a strange boy? Are you mad?" He started towards the door, trying to shove past various crew members.

"And what's wrong with my boy, 'xactly?" Shelly demanded, hands on her hips.

"Your son seems the right sort t' me," Jayne offered. "He's takin' good care of the girl. Won't take his eyes off 'er."

Simon shot Jayne a frazzled glare. "Well, that just makes it all better, doesn't it?" The doctor nodded to Shelly, apologetically. "My sister is rather... special," he said lamely. He headed for the door, cringing from the flat look on Shelly's face. "I'm going to go check on her."

Kaylee sighed watching Simon go. "That didn't go well."

Inara patted her hand reassuringly. "I'm sure he's just nervous."

Both women flinched as Shelly turned back to her work, slamming drawers with more force than necessary. "Have to say," Shelly said, irritation still evident in her voice. "Your doctor ain't got a way with folk."

Jayne snickered from the stove and Kaylee shot him a glare. "Simon's just... nervous, is all. He's tryin' real hard to make you like 'im, Ma."

Shelly gave her daughter a pointed look. "You always did have poor taste in men-folk. Was hopin' you'd a grown outta that."

"Ma!"

Mal managed to hold back a grin. "Girl could do worse than Simon Tam. Not rightly sure how..."

"Cap'n!" Kaylee reached across the table to swat at him.

"He ain't a bad guy," Zoë offered. "He's just bad at talking to folk."

"Real bad," Kaylee sighed. "But I have faith," she said brightly. "At some point, I'm gonna be talkin' to him, and he ain't gonna stick his foot in his mouth first thing!"

Jayne snorted as he put the biscuit pan in the oven. "That ain't never gonna happen, Kaylee, and you know it." The big man leaned against the counter, arms crossed. "He's gotta learn how to treat a lady."

Shelly smiled widely at him. "I bet you know all about that, you charmer! If I weren't happily married, I'd give my daughter a run for her money with you!"

"Ma!" Kaylee gasped in shock.

"Hey now," Jayne flashed a wicked grin. "Don't let that be stoppin' you."

"Jayne!"

"What?" He blinked innocently.

"Oh, don't you mind none, Kaylee," Shelly smiled. "No harm done. Been a while since someone other'n your Pa flirted some with me."

"An' that's a shame, that is," Jayne nodded.

"Oh God," Wash ran his hand over his face. "Make it stop."

"Well then, Jayne – would you go out and round everybody else up so we can stop scandalizing your crew?" Shelly fluttered her eyelashes outrageously at the big man.

"Yes, ma'am." Jayne wiped the flour off his hands with a tea towel and tossed it over Wash's head before heading outside.

"My crew," Mal murmured softly.

"An' a fine one you got, Captain Reynolds." Hank Frye appeared in the doorway, causing all eyes to turn on him. "'Cept for that doctor of yours. Man was trippin' all over his words, when we were talking earlier." He shook his head, his eyes landing on Kaylee. "You sure that's the one you meant?"

"Yes, Pa."

He moved to the head of the table and took a seat. "Leastways the boy seems content flyin' with you, Captain Reynolds. Says you've taken good care of m' girl. All 'cept that time she got shot."

The tray of baked beans in Shelly's hands clattered to the table. "*Wo de ma too zai zi!* Kaylee!" She rushed to her daughter's side, running her hands over her. "Are you alright? Does anything hurt? How did this—"

"Ma. Ma! I'm fine," she assured Shelly, mentally cursing Simon for ever bringing that up in front of her father. "It was ages ago. Really. Simon patched me up perfect right after."

Well, not right after, Mal said to himself.

Hank turned to Mal. "I thought you said my girl wouldn't be going out on any of your jobs?"

"We wasn't on a job, Pa," Kaylee tried. "Was an accident, that's all."

Hank was giving Mal a stern look and Shelly's hands twisted in her apron uncertainly. Mal was looking a little trapped.

"You and I're gonna have words, Captain." Hank's piercing brown eyes were fixed on Mal. "If you expect to take my little girl back in the air 'gain."

Kaylee gasped. "Pa, no!"

"Can't clip a bird's wings," River said seriously as she entered through the back door into the kitchen, the other men behind her. "Kaylee will fall."

Finn smiled at her. "You like birds?"

"Parrots can be taught to talk," she told him brightly. "Mostly people teach them to swear."

Jayne chuckled. "Sounds like my kinda bird."

"Won't be no clippin' 'till after we eat." Hank frowned. "I'd like hear 'bout this job of yours. Kaylee tells me you're shippin' puppies?"

Mal frowned. "We were aimin' to drop 'em off with a buyer on the other side of town. Got there and the place was empty. Prob'ly nothing. We'll head back into town tomorrow an' ask around, see where he's got to."

"Least," Zoë sighed. "That's what we're hoping."

Hank tilted his head thoughtfully. "There a real market for breeding these days?"

"Beagles, there are. Hunting dogs." She responded with a smile. "Folk on some of the border moons are startin' to think they got airs. Want the best of the best for their hunting parties, but can't seem to afford 'em straight from the Core."

"How much they sellin' for?"

"Two hundred credits, or thereabouts. According to our contact," Mal replied, spearing a piece of turkey with his fork.

Hank looked between the two of them. "Seems odd for a fellow to disappear, that much money on the line."

"Which is why I expect it's just a miscommunication," Mal said, watching in disbelief as Jayne helped himself to several slices of turkey. "Save some for everyone else, Jayne."

Shelly shook her head. "He ain't doing no harm. I like to see a man enjoy a good meal."

Jayne smirked and stabbed another piece of turkey. "Thank you kindly, ma'am."

River allowed Simon to fix her a plate, watching Finn move around the table and slide into the seat directly across from her with a shy smile. When she grinned back, Simon set the plate in front of her with a loud clatter. "You should eat, River."

Shelly frowned disapprovingly at him. "So, Simon. Tell us how you came to be on Serenity. Kaylee was always vague about it in her letters home."

Simon froze, a disturbed look in his eyes. His voice was very precise when he spoke. "We like ships."

River looked rather vacant. "Father wouldn't buy us our own."

Simon put his hand over hers. "We wanted to travel." A sardonic smile crawled onto his face. "We wanted to see other places."

"We have seen much crime," River replied coolly.

"Really?" Finn sat forward eagerly, looking at River. "Kaylee doesn't tell us nothin' 'bout what she's been up to."

"It's not much crime," Mal offered, opting to take control of the conversation before more was divulged than need be. "Smuggling, which you already know about. Petty stuff, actually."

"Right," Wash nodded. "Most exciting thing we had aboard lately were those wobbly-headed geisha dolls."

"Oh," Shelly grinned at the pilot. "I love those!"

Mal shot Inara a triumphant look. "See?"

Inara rolled her eyes and went back to delicately eating the beans on her plate.



Mal stood on the back porch of the Frye home, leaning up against the railing some hours after night had fallen, smirking to himself as he watched his crew settle in by the fire out back. Finn had brought out an old guitar and Jayne, much to the crew's amazement, was playing songs by Shelly's request.

Amused him some, how eager Jayne was to please Kaylee's folks, but then, could just be he liked showin' the doc up. Wash and Zoe were usin' the excuse of a campfire to cuddle up outside. River and Finn were sitting together, stiff-backed, but occasionally their knees would brush, and River would smile. It was nice to see her acting like a girl her age should be, and he figured her obvious pleasure was the only reason Doc hadn't said anything yet.

Faintly, he could hear Simon's voice on the breeze, "But he kills people."

"Some people need killin'," Shelly replied, without battin' a lash. "Kaylee-bear, why don't you come sit here, 'tween Jayne an' I."

Mal chuckled to himself, shaking his head. He almost felt sorry for the boy. Almost.

"I ain't careful, my wife's gonna be takin' up with your mercenary." The waft of cigar smoke followed Hank's words as he appeared on the porch behind him. "That's what he is, right? A paid killer?"

Mal took a sip of whiskey laced tea. "He don't shoot unless someone else shoots first."

Hank's eyes were sharp as he sized up the Captain. "He have to do a lot of shooting?"

"Not if I do my job right," Mal answered.

"Well, that's good," Hank said. "I trust he takes good care of my Kaylee?"

"We all try," he said honestly. "Girl has a mind of her own, though."

Hank snorted. "That she does. Gets it from her Ma."

"Kaylee's got a... special kind of spirit," his voice sobered. "I don't need to be tellin' you that, I suppose. Just think you should know that we all seen it and we appreciate it. Don't think there's a soul more loved on that boat than her. Ain't one of us wouldn't lay down our lives for her. You can be sure of that."

Exhaling a cloud of smoke, Hank nodded. "Got a talent for sayin' what a man needs to hear, Captain."

"I'm just bein' honest. Occasionally, I got a talent for that too."

Hank smiled. "Can't stop a father from worryin' about his baby girl. We miss her somethin' fierce."

"She misses you too, you know." Mal leaned up against the porch railing, which creaked under his weight. "Looks like you could use help with some repairs, Mr. Frye."

Hank patted the railing with a slightly gnarled hand. "That we could. We can find plenty of work for you and your crew to do while you're here, if you have a mind to help."

"And Simon?"

"Can he do anything worth doing?"

"He sews awful nice."

Hank took another long drag from his cigar, "Never got 'round to asking you about that contact in town. Who was it?"

"Fella named Lawti."

"Never heard tell of anyone by that name in these parts," Hank frowned.

Mal grunted in annoyance. "Don't much know what we're gonna do with a bunch of pups if we don't find him."

"Another buyer?"

"Only if they're close by." Mal shook his head. "Our contact on Persephone already got his cut up front. We're supposed to collect our cut with delivery. But we don't got the time to be looking for new buyers – a couple days, max. Besides," he added, "if we keep those pups much longer, all of them will get named and adopted, and then we'll never get rid of 'em."

He nodded towards Kaylee, who was laughing at something her momma was saying. "That one right there has been trying to talk me out of one since they got picked up."

Hank grinned. "That don't surprise me in the slightest."



Smiling, Kaylee nudged River awake, the younger girl having nodded off some time ago. The Captain was standing over the crew gathered around the waning fire. "Been imposing ourselves on the Frye's long enough. 'Bout time we start heading back to Serenity."

Shelly smiled tiredly. "Weren't an imposition, Captain. Always a boon gettin' to see our daughter and meet her friends. Sets a body's mind at ease to know who it is takin' care of her."

"Your hospitality's much appreciated, ma'am."

"Don't be ma'amin' me, young man. Makes a woman feel past her prime."

He grinned. "An' you're far from that, as Jayne has been kind enough to note. We still got a job to do, people. Ought to be heading back to the ship."

"It all right if I stay here, Cap'n?" Kaylee questioned. "I can meet y'all back at the ship in the mornin'?"

He shook his head. "Course you're stayin'. Don't expect you back on Serenity till we're headed for atmo neither. Family's more important." River was starting to lean into Kaylee again and Mal gestured for the rest to get movin'. "Once we find out somethin', we'll let you know how long to expect before we take off."

"Well now, you don't all have to go," Shelly shook her head. "We got a spare bed up in the attic and a awful comfy couch for the right sort of man to stretch out."

Kaylee rolled her eyes. "Ma!"

Shelly ignored her, and smiled at Jayne. "Probably more comfortable than wherever you're stayin' on that ship. And you can help Kaylee here with her chores in the morning."

"Might just take you up on that, Shelly."

"You mean River could stay the night here?" Finn blinked, more awake now than before.

"Of course she can."

Simon spoke up from where he sat on a log. "I don't think that's such a good idea." His vest was half unbuttoned from the heat of the fire, and he had dirt streaked down his cheek. "River has nightmares, and if she stays, I would need to stay as well."

Shelly frowned faintly. Her answer was rather short. "We don't got enough room for another body, and certainly don't have anything fancy enough for a doctor." She sniffed in derision.

Simon blinked, looking a little confused. "I don't require anything special, ma'am," he sounded a little hesitant. "I just meant that I would prefer that River not stay unless I could as well."

Shelly's eyes flashed in irritation. "We'll take fine care of your sister, Doctor Tam."

"It's quiet here, Simon," River yawned. "I promise to be good."

Simon closed his mouth with an unhappy sigh. "I'll be here first thing in the morning, River." His concern was plainly written on his face, but he knew better than to argue with River when she had made up her mind.

Shelly still looked unhappy with him, but he tried to say goodnight nicely. "Ma'am, I assure you..."

"Goodnight," she cut him off and started herding her family inside, leaving Simon standing miserably.

"They hate me," he muttered.

"Looks like," Wash threw in thoughtfully. "Maybe you should try being a mime."

"No," Simon sighed. "I would manage to offend people by standing wrong."



Shelly stood at the door as the others filed inside, purposefully overlooking Simon as she met the Captain's eyes. "I expect the lot of you back at the house for breakfast. What we got ain't much but it's better than the protein you got aboard."

Mal shifted his weight. "We do got a job that needs finishin' up, Ma'am."

"And you're not like to do it on an empty stomach," Shelly replied. "I expect ya back first thing in the mornin'. And in case you're thinking this is charity, you'll be earning this meal, Captain."

Hank chuckled and clapped a hand on Mal's shoulder. "Don't worry none, tomorrow's Sunday hereabouts. No one'll be movin' in town 'til after services. And you might as well bring Serenity and land her out back, don't make much sense the lot of you trekking back and forth."

Offering his hand to shake, Mal nodded. "We might very well do that."

Inara linked her arm through Simon's as he stood watching River sweep a curtsy at Finn as he held the door for her. "She'll be fine without you for one night, Simon," she said gently.

"I know," Simon nodded. "But I worry. And with a boy involved, I can't stop myself from panicking."

She laughed softly at the terrified look on his face. "Escort me back to the shuttle, Dr. Tam, and worry about Finn in the morning." She patted his arm. "I really don't think anything will happen under Mrs Frye's formidable watch."

He nodded ruefully and let her pull him away, automatically adjusting his grip so he was escorting her properly.



In her bedroom, Kaylee leaned against the doorway. Her room hadn't been changed at all since she'd left. It was still decorated with flowers and bright paint, her bedspread was still the same pink and yellow patch from clothes she'd long outgrown, a half dozen stuffed animals lined up at the headboard.

She hadn't realized until that moment, looking into a picture of her childhood, that she'd changed so much.

"You ain't in bed yet?" Her Pa's voice made her jump.

"Thinkin' on it," she replied. "You didn't change anything."

"Cause we knew you'd be back to visit," Hank replied. "Been a long day for you, baby girl."

"I know." She turned away from her room, slipping an arm around her father for a hug. "But I had to share you and Ma all day. Barely got a word in with either of you."

Her father shrugged as he tightened his arms around her. "You know us," he smiled. "Your Ma yells the orders and I do what she tells me."

Kaylee laughed into his chest. "What about everything else though? The workshop, the town, the house?" She hesitated. "I've been noticing some things ain't been gettin' fixed around here, Pa."

She looked up to see a worried look flash through his eyes, but he forced a smile. "Don't you be worrying on us. Things is just a little tight, is all."

"But why? Ain't you got enough business in the shop no more?"

"He's got plenty he could be fixing," Shelly said quietly from the doorway. "It's doing the fixing that he's having some trouble with."

"Now, Shelly," he started, but Shelly shot him a stern look.

"She's just gonna worry if you don't tell her, and she deserves to know."

Kaylee sank onto her bed, looking back and forth between her Ma and Pa with a worried frown. "I don't understand. Are we in some sorta trouble?"

"You could say that," Shelly sat beside her. "You know how your Pa has trouble with his hands hurting some, right?"

"Well, yeah, but only when the weather's bad."

"It ain't just the weather anymore, baby girl," Hank said with a sigh. "It's gettin' so most everyday they's hurtin' so bad I have trouble handling my tools." He gestured, and Kaylee noticed the swelled knuckles she had missed earlier. "Finn tries, but he ain't mechanical like you and me. He does better workin' here at the farm; doin' the gardening, keepin' the animals looked after – finding sick 'uns to take care of. Always did have an affinity for critters."

Tears welled up in Kaylee's eyes. "Didn't the doctor say nothin', Pa?" She examined his hands anxiously. "I hate to think of you hurting."

"Doc can't do nothin'," Shelly said gently. "We asked him right off. But with your Pa not working as much we're struggling to make ends meet right now."

"How big a struggle?" Kaylee's hands twisted in her lap.

Hank and Shelly exchanged a look.

Kaylee repeated, "How big a struggle?"

Hank laid a gnarled hand on top of his daughter's head. "Not so bad yet. We're keeping fed. The farm keeps us going. But we might have to close the shop."

"Not nothing you can do about it, Kaylee." Shelly folded her arms sternly across her chest when it looked like Kaylee was going to say something. "Don't go gettin' ideas into that head of yours. Only right that you should know is all."

"Of course there's somethin' I can do. I got some money I've been savin'." Her hands fluttered as she spoke. "And Simon! He's the best doctor in the Core, Pa, honest. Top three percent, says so himself. He could look at you and find what's—"

"Kaylee, that's enough. I already seen a doctor – don't need to see another. I already know this can't be fixed."

She reached for Hank's hand, holding it in both of hers. "But if you can't work..."

"We'll figure something out," he said firmly. "It's no cause for you to be worrying over."

"This is my home and my family. I got plenty of reason to be worrying!"

"Well," Shelly said, standing and straightening her skirts. "Ain't no cause to be worrying over it tonight, at any rate." She smoothed Kaylee's hair back from her concerned face. "We'll talk more about it in the morning."

"Yes, Ma," Kaylee nodded obediently.

But after her Ma and Pa kissed her goodnight. Kaylee looked out the window again and watched the stars, her forehead wrinkled in concern.



Simon scratched at the collar of his shirt. It was an old homespun button down of Mal's, and he was more uncomfortable in the time softened clothes than his own highly confining outfits. Zoe had taken pity on him and commandeered a shirt from Mal, telling him it would be more suited to the farm than his normal vest and shirt, and might help make Kaylee's parents be more comfortable around him.

The shirt was a bit too large for him and he almost wished she'd taken something from Wash's closet – would have asked her to, if he wasn't scared she'd show up with one of Wash's hideous Hawaiin shirts. If he wasn't afraid that something might infect him, he might have chosen one of Jayne's t-shirts. Kaylee's mother seemed to like those well enough.

He'd changed just as Wash landed at the Frye's and had entered the hold, only to find the others waiting for him and discussing Badger. It seemed Mal had waved him earlier and the seedy little crook had stated he had no idea where his contact was. He had suggested Mal find another buyer, and his nonchalance had Mal suspicious. "Greedy little *hun dan* – he's up to something," Mal said to Zoe as he opened the cargo doors.

"Shouldn't ought to be too hard to find a new buyer, but I don't like the need for it," Mal continued, stepping off the ship. "Don't have time to waste looking for a new buyer."

Inara frowned at that. "How long do you plan to stay grounded, Captain? Every day we're in wait—"

"—Is another day you can't peddle your wares. I know. Won't be more'n another day or two. Can't locate us a buyer on this rock, then we'll move on 'till we do. But it's a last resort; maybe this Lawti fella will show up."

"Sir, have you considered the possibility that there never was a buyer?" Zoe asked.

"And what? Badger set us up movin' cargo with no where to go?"

"Wouldn't be first time a body's had to wash their hands of cargo rather than bein' caught with it."

"Since that's indeed a possibility, we'll be open to negotiating our cargo with some of the locals. Much rather unload the pups with someone here than cartin' 'em halfway 'round the 'verse."

"You don't think the buyer could have been picked up by the law, do you?" Simon interjected suddenly. "I mean, if he's dealing in contraband canines..." he paused, suddenly paranoid. "What if the Alliance is here? My sister—"

"Your sister is fine, Doctor. Probably the most rested and well fed she's been since comin' outta that box. Alliance has no presence out here' if they did, I wouldn't've taken my eyes off the girl, *dong ma?*"

Wash grinned. "Besides, if they were after River, they'd have to get through Finn first."

"Don't remind me," Simon sighed.

"I think it's sweet." Inara slipped her arm through his and gave it a friendly squeeze. "River's a beautiful girl who should be flirting with plenty of boys. It's normal for someone her age."

Before Simon could reply, Mal interrupted. "We're gonna scout the town again today, see if the seeds we planted yesterday grew any roots. This ain't resolved one way or another, we'll break atmo and then you won't have to worry about Kaylee's little brother. Now shut up. Frye's are gonna be wonderin' what we're doing, standin' out here jabberin' at each other."



Shelly was in the kitchen preparing breakfast when Simon found her. "Mrs. Frye?"

Brown eyes flickered to Simon, and he had to remind himself they weren't Kaylee's. "Yes?"

"The Captain asked me to let you know we were here, and I... I wanted to thank you for your hospitality. Putting my sister up for the night was above and beyond anything I would have expected."

She arched a graying eyebrow at him and folded her arms across her chest. "Just 'cause we ain't Core folk don't mean we can't be hospitable."

"That's not what I—" Simon started to protest before his shoulders slumped. "Where is River now? I'd like to check on her."

"Finn took her out back to help him with the critters. He'll keep an eye on her — two of 'em most like. You expect to eat this morning, best head out back yourself. First meal is free, but the second you gotta work for."

"Out back?" He repeated dumbly.

"There's chores to be done."

"Oh, right." He nodded while backing up. "Of course."

Heading outside, he found a sweaty Jayne with an axe in hand, chopping wood. Giving the other man a wide berth, he nodded to Wash and Zoe, who were on their hands and knees in the garden, doing he didn't even know what.

Deciding that the most likely place to find River would be the barn, he headed in that direction. Inside, he found the majority of it had been converted into a shop. There was a huge shuttle taking up space inside. Somewhere among the parts he could hear Kaylee and Hank's muted voices.

Towards the back of the barn were stalls. He heard the yipping of puppies and the muted sound of Book's voice, so he headed in that direction. Book was sitting in the first stall beside a large dairy cow, milking it.

"You don't need any help with that, do you?" Simon asked, a grimace twisting his lips.

Book turned his head to smile at him. "Milking is more of a one man job."

"Yes. I can understand and be thankful for that. Have you seen River around?"

"She and Finn were just feeding the puppies when I came in."

Simon sighed. "I guess I'll go see if they need some help then."



Dust floated thick in the air at the back of the barn, swirling in the light streaming through the window. Finn hung back, his hands tucked into his pockets as he watched River move past the stalls. She didn't just move, though, she danced, sending the dust motes swirling around her.

Sighting her, the puppies scrambled to the edge of their makeshift pen, tails wagging excitedly as they tumbled over one another for her attention. Instead of picking one and lifting it out, she climbed over the divider and sat down in the middle of the pen, allowing the animals to swarm around her.

Finn rested both hands on the railing. "They like you."

"They think I'm one of them." She ducked her head away from a slobbery dog-kiss.

"Well, I never seen a prettier beagle in my life," he grinned and set to getting some feed and fresh water for the animals.

"You're trying to charm me," she told him matter-of-factly.

His eyes flew guiltily back to her, but she wasn't even looking at him, her attention focused on scratching the ears of one of the pups. "Trying to?" He chuckled. "Does that mean it's not working?"

Tilting her head to slant a look up at him, a lock of her hair fell back from her face. "Does it usually?"

"River Tam," he smiled slowly. "I do believe you're flirting with me."

A flush climbed her cheeks, but she didn't turn away from his gaze. "Is that what this is?"

"You don't know what flirting is?" He ruefully shook his head as he fed the dogs. "You've been on that ship too long."

"Not so long."

"Long enough. If you'd been off it at all, every poor fool who walked by would be trying to flirt with you."

A bright smile lit her face. "You're doing it again."

"Is it working yet?"

She released the puppy in her arms and he went scampering across the small enclosure to feast. "How is it intended to work?" Her brow furrowed as she gazed at him. "What is the objective?"

"The objective?" He scratched his head a little, looking away from her to the puppies and back again. "Ain't had anyone ask me that before. Guess it's to get you to like me."

"Flattery is a successful method for this?"

"Yeah, sure. I mean, it's worked for me before. Not that I— There hasn't been—" he stammered. "I don't go makin' it a practice to hit on just anybody. I've gone with a few girls 'fore, and they seemed to like it, is all."

"I understand," she nodded succinctly.

"Uh, you do...?"

"Your face is pleasingly proportionate."

Sitting down across from her, he caught a puppy under the stomach and set her in his lap. "That's some fancy flirting, right there."

"But superfluous and redundant." She shrugged a shoulder, watching as he examined the puppy in his arms.

"Yeah, how so?"

"You already like me. Didn't have to try."

"And how do you know that?" he teased, checking the puppy's ears. "You a mind reader too?"

"She's intuitive." Simon leaned precariously against the small pen, running his eyes over River to assuage his worry. He smiled wanly at the way Finn jumped at his voice. "Always was. Not that it would take a mind reader to ascertain your interest in my sister."

Finn's mouth worked up and down for a moment, without any sound.

"Ignore him. Simon thinks he is father, mother and brother in one. Too many faces hiding the real one." She gave her brother an exasperated look, and he found it was an expression he hadn't missed after all. "This girl is fine, see to your other."

"Naw, really, it's fine." Finn stood up, still cradling the puppy protectively in his arm. "I noticed this one was limpin' a bit, and I found a shard of something in her paw. I'm gonna take care of it 'fore it festers. Probably best you don't see that."

"Little Gun?" River rose gracefully, coming to Finn's side to rub the puppy's ears.

"Won't take but a few moments."

Simon frowned slightly. "I brought my med bag. I should be able to remove that without any trouble."

"Kind of ya, but I got a fair good stock of vet supplies. If one animal ain't sick it's another." Finn looked from River to Simon. "Wouldn't mind ya havin' a look though. Would be good to have a doctor's input on our stock."

"I can look," Simon smiled as Finn and River exited the pen. "Do you take care of all the animals yourself?"

"Mostly. Had a regular vet in town for a while, but he passed on. Taught me what he could before he died, though. I help out the neighbours when I can."

"Well, you probably don't need me then. Like you said, she probably just has something in her paw. I should go and see if I can – pick vegetables, or something." He grinned wanly at this, noting the way Finn cradled the puppy in one arm, the other hand resting lightly on River's back. "You're good with her."

"The animals talk and he listens," River responded with a proud smile.

"Ain't nothin' so complicated as that," Finn replied.

Simon simply nodded and headed back out of the barn.

He hadn't meant the puppy.

Shaking his head, he headed back outside, stopping only when Jayne called him over.

"Hey, Doc."

Hesitantly, he began moving toward Jayne, his eyes fixed firmly on the axe in his hand. "Yes?"

"Why don't you give me a hand here."

"You seem to be doing just fine on your own."

"I wanna get as much of this choppin' done as can be before breakfast. Four hands're better'n two, even if two of 'em's yours." He held out the axe to Simon, smirking. "Take it. You go on choppin' while I take what's done and stack it beside the house."

Adjusting his grip on the axe, Simon hefted its weight. "It's summer. Why are you chopping wood now?"

Jayne grabbed some wood and rolled his eyes. "They need it for the stove, dumbass. Electricity ain't cheap out here. For top three percent, you don't know nothin', do you?"

A mutinous look on his face, Simon set a piece of wood on the chopping block. "Got any gloves?"

"'Fraid you'll ruin them lily white hands?"

Glaring, he stepped back and brought the axe down with all his might, wishing it were Jayne's head.



"Kayls?" Kaylee jumped slightly at the sudden intrusion into the otherwise silent shop. Her Pa had headed in to the house the moment the smell of fresh eggs made it out to them in the barn, leaving her alone with all the machinery. Not that she minded in the least, always did her best thinking when surrounded by metal.

Either a thing worked or it didn't. And if a thing didn't work, she'd find some way to make it. All it took was looking at a piece from all angles to find what was broken. After that, it was just tinkering and finagling and wheedling to get an engine purring again. Sometimes she came across something that, no matter how she tried, just stayed broke. 'Bout the only thing to do then was replace the part. Problem was, there weren't any replacement parts for her family.

"Kaylee?"

"Over here, Finn." She pushed out from under the Lysander 4350 she'd been tinkering with. She'd never had her hands on an engine of the like, and couldn't resist exploring all its parts, big and small.

"C'mon. Ma's holdin' breakfast on you." He had one hand braced on his hip, an amused smile tilting the corner of his mouth. "Figures you come home and the first thing you do is find the nearest engine."

"I come home an' the first thing you do is find the nearest pretty girl."

Finn couldn't hide the smile lighting his face, though he tried. "Ain't nothin'. She's different than the other girls, is all."

Kaylee sobered slightly. "You be kind to her, dong ma? River's gone through plenty you couldn't even guess. Don't want you takin' advantage just 'cause she might smile at ya."

"Take advantage? Me?"

She dried her hands on an old towel, giving him a bland look. "I know exactly what you and Tien Li got up to three summers ago. Ain't like to forget, walkin' in on that."

Finn grinned. "Yeah, me neither."

"River ain't like that. She's a proper girl. Raised in the Core."

He scowled at her. "Just 'cause you've been off world a while, don't go gettin' airs like you're better'n me, Kaywinnet."

"I am better'n you," she teased.

Didn't seem like Finn was in a teasing sort of mood. "Y'know me good enough, I wouldn't hurt a girl to save my life."

She smiled gently. "River's different, Finn. She's been... sheltered."

Folding his arms across his chest, he narrowed his eyes at his sister. "I know just lookin' at her that she's a better person than all the rest of the women on this moon put together, you don't have to tell me. She's smart and beautiful and sweet... just watch her with them pups, and you can tell how special she is. She don't look down on nobody, and when she smiles her eyes get all big and shiny, like melted chocolate – the real kind, not the synthetic stuff. Take a man more foolish'n me to look at her and see just another girl. Couldn't hurt her even if my life depended on it. Girl's like that... they only come by once in a lifetime."

He stopped when he realized Kaylee was laughing at him. "What?"

"Just wanted to make sure you knew how special she was. I can see that you do."

"You always were able to talk anything out of me," he grumbled. "I didn't miss that."

She reached out, giving him a tight hug. "'Course you did. That's what big sisters are for."

Finn gave her a sheepish smile and hugged her back. "In case I didn't say it earlier, I did miss you, Kayls."

"I know," she squeezed his arm. "I missed you too."

"And as touching as this is, breakfast is still waiting on us. Don't think that mercenary of yours'll be too happy eatin' food gone cold."

"Wouldn't worry none, Jayne'll eat whatever's put in front of him so long as it comes with a knife. And he's not my anything."

"Not what Ma says."

"Ma just loves playin' matchmaker is all. Don't matter none, ship'll be taking off before long." She slowed as they neared the house, her teeth sinking into her lower lip. "Finn?"

"Hmm?" He stopped, looking back at her.

"How are things, really?"

His lighthearted smile drained away, revealing weary lines that had no place on her little brother's face. "Work ain't comin' into the shop like it used to. We're making enough to keep the animals fed though, and so long as we have the farm, not like we'll starve."

"But what if..."

"Don't borrow trouble, Kayls. You know Ma don't like 'what ifs.' Now come on – let's go eat."



After breakfast, the doctor stammered something apologetic to Shelly, asked Inara to keep an eye on River while she learned to make biscuits, and then moved towards the barn. He wanted to talk to Kaylee's father and figured it would be better to do it sooner rather than later.

He was surprised to see only Hank bent over a small engine when he entered the barn.

"Where's Kaylee?" he asked when Hank looked up at him. "I thought she'd be here with you. Did she go into town with Mal and Zoe?"

The older man shrugged. "Don't rightly know," he muttered, before glaring at the engine in front of him and flexing his fingers.

"Can I help?"

Hank looked up at that, a surprised look flickering over his face. "You ever worked on a Hinkner engine, boy?"

"No, but I'm sure I can try. Kaylee's been teaching me a bit about mechanics."

"She has, has she? Well, let's see how much you've learned. Come over here – you can hand me my tools as I need them."

Simon moved to the opposite side of the engine, closer to Hank's tools and glanced at the older man's swollen knuckles. "Are your hands bothering you?"

"Some days," Hank replied tersely. "Hand me the spanner."

"What did your doctor say?" Simon asked, placing the tool gently in Hank's outstretched hand.

"Says there's nothing to be done."

Simon snorted.

Hank's gaze shifted from the engine to the young doctor. "What?"

"There's always something to be done. Give me your hand."

The young man's grip was firm and more callused than Hank expected. He winced when Simon told him to make a fist. "Why would the doc say he couldn't do anything?"

"Depends." Simon examined Hank's loose fist with a frown. "He might not have the right medicine. If you were on Osiris or one of the Core planets, we could easily replace the knuckles."

"Well, we ain't on a Core planet." Hank spoke sharper than he meant to, but Simon didn't even flinch. "Our doctors gotta make do with what's available to 'em – Alliance ain't too keen on providin' us with any fancy medicines or treatments."

Simon nodded at that and gently manipulated Hank's fingers. "So I've noticed. Are you having any other pain?"

"Just stiffness, mostly. My fingers don't bend like they used to."

"Looks like osteoarthritis," Simon finally said. "Fairly well advanced, but nothing that has to be suffered through."

Hank blinked. "What? You mean you can treat it? You can fix my hands?"

Simon shook his head, propping a hip against the work bench. "There is no cure – you need to understand that. There are some treatments we can try though, that will alleviate the stiffness. I can teach you some hand exercises to keep the joints limber and heat therapy would work. Your hands will never recover entirely but we could get them to the point were they're not bothering you as much."

Hank rubbed his knuckles. "Will I be able to work in the shop?"

"I'm not sure. More than you are now, but I don't think you could do it full time. You will gain more mobility with treatment, though. If you have some time, I could show you a few hand and joint exercises right now."

"Doc?" Hank was studying him with a puzzled frown. "You already know I ain't too fond of you."

Simon stopped and almost smirked. "I'm well aware."

"Then why are you trying to help? You ain't trying to make up for messing around with my Kaylee girl, are you?"

Simon did smile then. " I'm a doctor. It's what I do."

* * * * *

Deer wasn't very big, considering it was the capital of Hartford – only a few dozen wooden buildings dotted the main street. Mal looked around and frowned, before heading towards the General Store, Zoe and Jayne behind him. The proprietor of the shop --a short man named Stout – had told them yesterday he'd discreetly ask around for them.

When Mal pushed through the doors, Stout glanced up from the counter where he'd been talking to another man and smiled at him.

"Told you he'd be around soon, Jake. Captain Reynolds –" he waved Mal over, beaming, "this is Jake Hurley; a friend of mine from Anah. Jake is interested in them pups of yours."

Mal grinned at that, holding out his hand and shaking the other man's firmly. "They're fine animals," he offered. "All healthy. They'll make fine breeders when they've reached adulthood. We've even got proper papers for 'em and everything."



It took Kaylee just over an hour to pack all her belongings into two separate bags. She found herself lingering over this item and that, remembering where she'd gotten it, or from whom. There was so much she hadn't been able to fit into her luggage. Tools she'd grown attached to that Serenity would need more than she did, books that she was leaving for the Shepherd and River to read, a fairytale dress that couldn't belong anywhere but Serenity.

She'd wanted to leave something for each of the crew, but she had so little. A fan for Inara, a pretty knife she'd picked up for next to nothing for Jayne, lights for Wash to string in his bunk so he could see the stars even down there, her set of jacks for River to beat the pants off of someone else for a change, a thin piece of metal from Serenity she'd been working into a bookmark for the Shepherd's bible. For Simon, she left a bullet fragment on a tray on his nightstand, he'd saved her life that first night, and she wanted him to know she'd be grateful the rest of her life.

She didn't have anything for Mal or Zoe. She didn't think that they'd mind, both of them held their memories close to the vest.

The last place she visited was the engine room. Her tools lay scattered on the floor under the turbine, where she'd been working on the Viese lock. Darn thing wasn't catching properly. Sliding under the engine she worked on it and tried to ignore the tears pooling in the corners of her eyes and running slowly down her cheeks.

She had been hoping the job would last all day, but her Pa had been right when he'd said all it probably needed was a new locking pin. She should've thought of that herself, but she'd been so excited 'bout seeing her folks again, it hadn't even occurred to her. When the locking mechanism finally slid into place, she sighed and placed her palm flat against the underside of the engine.

The metal was cool to her touch and Kaylee wished she could start it, just to feel the thrum of it against her skin. "You be good now," she murmured. "Cap'n won't take long to find a new mechanic – you make sure you treat 'em nice. Try not to forget me, though. Ain't no one ever gonna love ya much as I do."

She lay there a few moments more, before sighing and sliding to her feet. There was no excuse to stay any longer, but she decided to run a few diagnostic tests anyway. She also spent twenty minutes looking at the hammock, before finally deciding that it should stay for the next mechanic to use.

Storing her bags behind the shed, she reminded herself she was making the right choice, no matter how much it would hurt.



Mal shoved his way into the house. "Good news!" he announced. And then blinked.

The kitchen was empty. A pan of biscuits was overturned on the floor.

Mal was filled with foreboding. He drew his gun, stepping around the biscuits as quietly as possible. The window was covered in a sheer curtain and he nudged the barrel of his gun through the fabric enough to look out.

Mal's eyes widened in alarm. "*Zhe shi shenme lan dongxi?*" he spat. River Tam stood on top of the fence post, eyes wild, pacing on the incredibly thin railing.

Below her, hands clasped over her mouth in horror, was Shelly Frye.

Mal ran, shoving his gun back into the holster as he muttered inventive curses on River's *hun dan* of a brother. Doc was supposed to be watching her, keep her from making a scene.

Inara was trying to calm River down, but it didn't seem to be having an effect. Mal glanced around and when he couldn't see Simon, started yelling for him. "Doc!"

River looked directly at him, her hair falling over her face in wild tangles. "You did it," she pointed a shaking finger at him. "You brought them here for death and dismemberment, and for what?"

"I didn't bring nobody here to die, little one," Mal tried to reassure her, hands held out non-threateningly in front of him. Glancing over his shoulder, he saw the doctor emerge out of the barn, Hank Frye close behind him.

Mal could tell exactly when the doctor saw them, as he started to run.

"How long has she been like this?" Simon snapped at Inara, stepping past her and lifting his hands up to his sister. "River," he said soothingly. "River, will you come down?"

She pivoted on one foot, leaning forward until she was almost looking her brother in the eyes. Her voice was ragged. "Not until the killing stops."

Simon blinked. "What killing?"

She ignored him, hands running through her hair frantically.

"River." Simon balanced on the lower rung of the fence, hands reaching out to pull his sister closer. "Tell me what is being killed, and I will do everything in my power to stop it." He cupped her face gently as her eyes suddenly filled with tears.

She wavered, her balance starting to falter. She slipped her hands around her brother's neck. "Oh, Simon!" she wailed. "He'll make them killers, biters! Brother against brother – whips and chains and rending limb from limb." She buried her face in his neck.

"I know." He stroked her back and rocked her as well as he could with both of them balanced on a fence post.

Shelly and Hank stood back as Simon helped his sister down, leading her over to the stump used for cutting wood. "Now, tell me what's wrong?" He accepted a handkerchief from Inara with an absent nod. "Whatever it is, I promise I will help if I can."

River sniffed into his shoulder, tears still spilling down her face. "The man," she said, leaning forward earnestly. "The betting man. He wants to turn them into weapons. Why does he want to hurt them? They're innocent." Her face crumbled again. "Save them..."

"I will," he promised, cradling her back into his chest. "But you have to tell me who is getting hurt."

She raised her face to Mal's. "He isn't a good one to sell to. He makes them have sharp teeth."

"Hold on one second... You trying to tell me that Ol' Jake is some kind of..." Mal gestured wordlessly, eyebrows raised in a question.

"He hurts things. He doesn't like warm wet noses and soft fur, he likes blood and pain," River told him earnestly. She stood suddenly, knocking Simon backwards a slightly. "You can't let him! No sale!"

"Now, River," Simon started, understanding in his face. "I'm sure Mal wouldn't sell them to someone who would..."

"Little Gun does not belong to that man!" She ignored Simon and poked Mal in the chest with one finger. "Little Gun belongs to herself, and she doesn't want to kill her friends!"

Mal studied her face for a moment. "Are you sure?"

She hissed out a yes, striking out at her brother as he tried to get her to sit back down. Shelly drew back in shock. Hank put his arm around his wife protectively as River spun by them.

River nodded in satisfaction, eyes wild. "Feed him to the sharks," she ordered. She suddenly staggered backwards into her brother's arms, one hand covering her eyes. "Too much death already."

"Got any ideas of a new buyer then, little one?" Mal asked quietly as Simon continued soothing her.

"Someone... anyone. Finn could do it," Simon offered over his shoulder. "He's good with animals." He turned back to River, speaking softly to her as tears continued to drip down her face. "Shh, *mei-mei*. Mal won't let anyone hurt the puppies. You need to stop worrying. Come on – let's go to the kitchen. You can show me how the biscuit making is coming along."

Shelly and Hank had watched Simon lead River away with wide eyes. "What just happened?"

Mal was brooding in thought, so Inara answered smoothly. "River has been through quite a lot, sometimes she gets a little overwhelmed. Simon is very protective of her."

"Figured he just thought my boy weren't good enough for his little sister." Shelly twisted her hands in her apron as she stared at the house, shaking her head. "A fancy doctor from the Core. He's so stuffy and closed up, not like our Kaylee."

Inara turned to look at Mr and Mrs Frye seriously. "Maybe you should ask Kaylee why a man like Simon is riding on a ship like *Serenity*, when he could be head of trauma surgery on a planet like *Osiris*."

Hank looked thoughtful. "Does it have to do with his sister?"

Mal snorted at that. "He's fairly particular about her. For good reason, mostly."

The older man nodded. "Had an aunt that just sorta knew stuff. She always told us when the toilet was gonna overflow. Some folk thought she was a witch but she was just real intuitive. Who did you sell them dogs too?"

"Man by the name of Hurley – we're supposed to drop them off at Blythe, on Anah – not more than a couple hours flight from here. You heard tell of any illegal dog-fighting on any of Paquin's moons?"

"No, not here on Hartford," Hank answered thoughtfully. "Although Blythe – it ain't exactly the most law-abiding of places. Lot's of gambling goes on there – wouldn't surprise me in the least. You still gonna take them pups there?"

"Don't see how I can," Mal sighed. "River and Kaylee would never forgive me if I did that. 'Sides which, that sorta entertainment ain't something I hold to. Puts us back at square one, though."



"Whaddaya mean, no sale?" Jayne snorted. "You don't even *know* if River was right! Hell, you don't even know if she was talkin' 'bout dog-fights! She never speaks no sense anyway."

"Jayne, Mrs Frye might've taken a likin' to that mouth of yours, but the rest of us got no problem sewin' it shut." Mal released a puff of air before addressing Zoe's last question. "Figure we might send out a few feelers, see if we can't find another interested party."

"And the job waiting for us on Restmore?"

"We do it."

"Haulin' around a boatful of canines?" Jayne scoffed. "Always thought you were off your rocker, this just proves it."

"I'm sure Simon brought his weave kit with him." Mal glared pointedly at Jayne as they ascended the porch.

All four Fries were already on the veranda with Simon, River and Inara. It took only a moment for Wash and Book to join them.

"Turns out, our potential buyer had less than breederly intentions for our cargo. Which means we'll have to start looking elsewhere. Serenity breaks atmo in two hours. Should give us time to get the pups back aboard and make proper goodbyes."

"That seems awful sudden, Mal." Inara looked between Kaylee and Shelly, the elder Frye's hand resting on her daughter's shoulder. "Surely we could spare a few more hours."

His mouth pressed into a firm line. "We all got work needs doin'. Including you." Dragging his eyes off Inara, he offered Hank and Shelly a smile. "Won't be so long next time between visits. You all have been most accomodatin'. Don't think I can thank you enough."

"Been our pleasure. Good to meet the men and women our Kaylee's been keepin' in the air."

"Jayne, you and Book get started with the dogs."

The men rose to do as they were ordered, the rest disbanding to make their goodbyes when Kaylee tentatively raised her hand to stop them. "Um, just one more thing."

"Lil' Kaylee?"

"I wanted to tell everyone..." she swallowed back her tears and straightened her shoulders. "I wanted to tell everyone at once that I'm staying. My family needs me more than Serenity."

There was dead silence for all of a moment before a dozen voices filled the small living space. "You're not staying, young lady—"

"Oh, Kaylee—"

"I understand, but—"

"But Mal, you said if I was on my best behavior—"

"Broken hands, broken dolls—"

"There must be some way—"

"I won't stand for it—"

"This is so unexpected—"

"I've made my decision," she said thickly, shrugging out from under her mother's staying hand. "It's mine to make an' no one else's." She turned to face the Captain, but couldn't manage to raise her eyes to meet his. "I cleaned out my bunk this morning, so I won't hold you up." She took a deep breath. "I checked over the engine, made sure she'll run long enough for ya to get another mechanic."

"Kaylee—"

"No!" She couldn't suppress the tears swimming in her eyes. "My decision is final. I gotta stay here; help my family..." She barely managed to get the words out passed the lump in her throat before she turned and ran out the door, leaving a dozen shocked faces behind her.

After a few moments of stunned silence, Mal shook his head and barked at Simon. "Doc, what were you sayin' earlier t'me 'bout Finn bein' able t'take care of them dogs?"

Simon looked up nervously. "Well, I... I was just saying, Finn is good with animals. He could raise the puppies and breed them. It could be a nice supplementary income for the Fries."

Hank nodded, catching on. "Boy always did have a knack with animals."

Finn quickly piped up. "Breeding beagles'd be a real good job, when they're old enough. Ain't nothing to whelping puppies. It would be easy to sell 'em too – people are always looking for good hunting dogs around these parts."

Jayne's brow furrowed. "Wait. We're givin' the dogs to 'em?"

Mal ignored him. "Could be a nice job for you folk. So, you're interested?"

Hank looked thoughtful. "Jayne's got a point, captain. We ain't got the money t'pay for eight pups and still afford their chow."

Mal nodded. "Reckon that might be the case. But we ain't gonna turn a profit on this one if we don't find a buyer anyway. Figure you take 'em, pay us a percentage of the proceeds from your first litter, pay us for any transporting of puppies to new owners we do for you, we could call it even."

Hank glanced to Shelley. "That'd be a lot of dogs," he warned.

Her eyes were sparkling, already decided. "Of course we'll take them. It's the perfect thing. Won't be so hard on your hands and, like you said, it'll provide a nice supplementary income. We can make this work, Hank. You, me and Finn – we could really make this work."

Mal inclined his head. "Ain't no doubt in my mind, ma'am. Know you folks'll take care of them in the right way." His eyes turned to focus on Finn. "What you say, boy? Ready to enter th'world of animal husbandry?"

Finn beamed at him. "Yes, sir."

"Then we got ourselves a deal – and we get to keep our mechanic."



Kaylee didn't know where she was running to; she just knew she needed to get away before she burst into tears in front of everyone. She could tell by their faces that her announcement had shocked them all. Even Simon's face had looked a little pale at the prospect of losing her. Normally that kind of outpouring of affection would have made her ecstatically happy. She'd always thought of the crew as her second family and knowing she was leaving them left her with an overwhelming sense of loss.

What other choice did she have, though? Her family needed her, more than Serenity did – more than the crew did. It didn't matter that she didn't want to stay – she was an adult now, not a little girl. Wiping at her eyes angrily, she stopped running and straightened her shoulders. She was making the right decision, even though it was a hard one – she had responsibilities to her parents. She couldn't leave them, when her staying would mean that Pa's business wouldn't fail.

When Kaylee finally returned to the farm, Inara, Zoe and Mal were on the porch with her parents, talking quietly. Simon smiled at her from inside the doorway but she could only manage a weak one in return. She clasped her hands together in front of her as she joined him. "Where are the others?" she asked, just as Book and Wash came around the house, River and Finn trailing after them. A puppy was tucked under Wash's arm, wiggling happily. River was cradling another, laughing as it strained to lick her cheek, no signs of her earlier breakdown the least bit apparent.

"Husband?" Zoe questioned upon seeing him. "Is that Vera in your arms or is my space dementia acting up again?"

"It's the space dementia. Definitely. No puppies here," Wash grinned. "Being landlocked for so long must have triggered it. Guess there's no help for it. I'm sure once we're space-born again, these hallucinations of yours will go away. Two... three months, maybe?"

"Wash, I don't allow pets on my ship," Mal growled.

"Oh, no. Not you too, Captain! Is dementia contagious, Doc?"

Kaylee smiled despite herself and leaned into Simon, "What's going on?"

"Hmm? I think Wash is trying to trick Zoe into letting him keep a puppy."

"Why is he even asking for a puppy. I thought they were going with you?"

"With us," he corrected with a wide smile, "and they aren't."

"That's right," Shelly joined them, sliding her arm around Simon's waist. It took Kaylee a full moment to absorb that fact before she even heard what her mother was saying. "—came up with the idea. Quite a smart young man you have here, Kaylee-bear, to find a solution to all of our problems like that. Don't think it was the deal your Captain was quite looking for, but he seems happy with it."

Hank and Mal joined them, leaving Zoe to deal with Wash. "I'm thinking we're walking away with the sweeter deal, Shelly. My mechanic is worth far more than a few mangy animals. And we'll get some pay in due time."

"Could someone please tell me what's going on?" Kaylee blinked in confusion, looking between her Captain and her mother.

"Your Doctor here," Shelly gave Simon another squeeze, causing a blush to flood his features, "suggested Finn could take care of the pups and that we could breed them. And Captain Reynolds offered to transport 'em when we got a fair number ready for sale."

"He did?"

"Not the same as working on engines," Hank smiled. "But them things are kinda cute. That type of work is a different reward all on its own."

"You'd really be happy breedin' dogs?"

"Like to be doin' something of use again, Kaylee." He smiled. "Don't you worry none about us. Things play out, we'll be turnin' a profit again in a year's time. Things'll be different the next time you come for a visit."

She glanced from her father to her mother. "But... I'm staying."

Mal ignored her, glancing out toward the shop. "Where's Jayne? Shouldn't be takin' him so long unloading those supplies."

"Can't thank you enough for givin' us what you had left of the dog food. Should hold us over until we can head into town for more." Hank held out his hand and Mal clasped it firmly.

"Can't thank you enough for bein' willin' to part with Kaylee again. Couldn't run my ship without her."

A frustrated growl left Kaylee's throat. "I ain't leavin'! Don't have to be—"

One moment she was gearing up for a fight, and the next she was upside down, staring at Jayne's backside. "Jayne!"

He adjusted her so that his shoulder wasn't digging so sharply into her abdomen. "Hold still, girl. Else I might drop you."

"Jayne!" Kaylee hit his back. "You put me down! Right now!"

"Guess that's our cue to leave," Mal grinned, picking up the bags Kaylee had dropped. "Simon, where's River?"

"Saying goodbye to Finn," Simon replied ruefully. "She'll be along in a second."

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Clasping River's hand, Finn had led her around the side of the house, just far enough to be out of sight but close enough to hear if anyone was calling for her. She was leaning against the side of the house, staring down at their joined hands. "River?"

She didn't reply and instead lifted their hands, her fingers unfolding to press palm to palm with his. "Holy palmer's kiss."

Finn looked at their hands and then back to her face, his own flaming crimson, "I ain't sure there's anything holy about it, but..." His fingers slid along her jaw to tilt her face up to his.

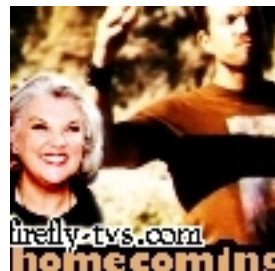
Large doe eyes lifted up to meet his, and she bit her lower lip. "I waited, but I didn't know what for. Couldn't remember." A shy smile blossomed on her face, "You reminded me what girls wish for."

Blushing, he shifted his weight, "I ain't anybody's idea of a wish, River."

"Mine."

His fingers slid along her jaw to tilt her face up, his words whisper soft just before he kissed her, "Well, I reckon that makes us both a little crazy."

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